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*The Bent Bow*

O whan he came to broken briggs,  
He bent his bow and swam.<sup>1</sup>

In the English and Scottish Popular Ballads, the phrase *bent his bow* has remained a puzzle. It is usually assumed that the "bonny boy" ran with bow in hand. Carrying a weapon, however, would retard the runner; and bending the bow would consume time and valuable energy for one who is to swim dangerous streams. I offer the following explanation.

The word "bow" meant "shoulder" or "upper arm" during the old and middle English periods.<sup>2</sup> The Old English form is *bog* or *boh* with the Old Norse cognate form *bog-r*. An example of the Old English form is found in the first of the *Riddles of the Exeter Book*, in the line,

Donne me se beadcafa bogum bilegde.<sup>3</sup>  
'Then the warlike (one) covered me with his arms.'

In *Morte Arthure* there is listed among the delicacies served at the Round Table,

. . . bowes of wylde bores with the braune lechyde.<sup>4</sup>  
'Shoulders of wild boars with the brawn cut into slices.'

A related word *baug* is used in the same sense by the Norwegians of today.<sup>5</sup>

In a version of the ballad, *Lord Barnard and Little Musgrave*, found in Nova Scotia under the name of *Little Matha Grove*, the line in question reads,

And he bended his brest and he swum.<sup>6</sup>

Although this line does not convey a meaning identical with the one suggested, it is possible that rationalization of the usual form may have taken place. While in modern English *bow* is not used to mean "arm" or "shoulder" in speaking of a man or beast, it is customarily applied to the shoulder of a boat or ship.

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<sup>1</sup> Francis J. Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Vol. II, p. 114. Substantially the same lines occur in Vol. II, pp. 117, 119, 121, 122, 129, 177, 212, 277, 287, 313, 379, 395; Vol. IV, pp. 229, 398.

<sup>2</sup> See *New English Dictionary*, s. v.

<sup>3</sup> *Riddles of the Exeter Book*, ed. by Frederick Tupper, Jr., p. 1, l. 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Morte Arthure*, ed. by Edmund Brock, Early English Text Society, Original Series, No. 8, l. 188.

<sup>5</sup> J. Byrnildsen, *Norsk-Engelsk Ordbog*, Christiania, 1917.

<sup>6</sup> W. R. Mackenzie, *The Quest of the Ballad*, p. 15.